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## **Taming the beast**

### **- Swedish motoring magazines and techno-embodied masculinities in the making**

#### Abstract

This paper explores the discursive production of ‘techno-embodied’ masculinities in Swedish motor magazines on cars and car styling. Such media configurations draw on how users style and reshape cars, often in ways that emphasise speed, potency and racy looks, meanings not only translating into traditional masculine gender ideals, but that also constitute various hybrid body relations. Three examples of figurations are analysed in more detail; the so called *Muscle car* relies on a ‘liveliness’ associated with the untamed wild predator animal, as simultaneously promising and threatening in its nature; the *Sleeper car* looks very tame and quiet but with the potential of so much more; and the Volvo car represents the *peoples car* in a Swedish context. Even though the interest in car customizing is traditionally a male dominated arena and symbolically linked to cultural notions of masculinity, the analysed motor magazines are not an all male domain. The third example (peoples car) explores how the female car-builder/car figuration may both reinforce as well as undermine the often taken for granted relations between men-masculinity and cars. Female pleasures in cars is not simply inverted or rejected into something ‘different’ to the traditionally masculine desire for potent cars within this context. Taking the outset in these examples the paper outlines ways that boundaries between potent cars, car builders and imaginaries attached to cars forms various bodily relations, constituted around intersections of masculinity, class, nationality, nature and technology.

# Taming the beast

## - Swedish motoring magazines and techno-embodied masculinities in the making

### Starting up the vehicle

This paper discusses the gendered media-configurations of cars and hobby car customizers in magazines on car styling. Within this regime of meaning, any ‘ordinary’ mass-produced stock car that anyone may own is rejected as of less interest; rather, what is emphasised is in what ways ‘ordinary’ cars may be reconfigured into a car expressing a ‘personal’ touch. Car customizing signifies a personal territory embedded in car culture – a site where the self is configured through the car. Cars are, as Paul Gilroy (2001: 89) points out, ‘integral to the privatization, individualisation and emotionalization of consumer society as a whole’ and can in effect become active, dynamic social forces signifying class location, ‘taste’ and respectability. Designed for speed and high performance, cars signify culturally, socially and imaginary masculinity (Mellström 2004, Polk 1998, Landström 2006). However, to culturally construct cars as a technology merely for ‘men’, or even as ‘masculine’, is an ongoing practice. The connections between men, masculinity and cars are an effect of ongoing processes of cultural meaning-making under constant negotiation (Landström 2006: 33). Exploring these processes further, this paper zooms in on the configurations<sup>1</sup> of such masculinity in Swedish motor magazines.

Going beyond the car as merely a ‘penis- enhancement’ for men, indeed a most common way of understanding the relationships between men, masculinity and cars, this paper stresses to further such outmoded and oversimplified understandings. With the specific aim of contributing to a greater understanding of the meanings of cars within the domains of men and masculinities, I wish, from a feminist standpoint, to contribute to the present “state of the body” in contemporary culture (Balsamo 1996:159). Furthermore, to propel additional debates on configurations of men and masculinities in popular media may also be a way of contrasting dangerous driving in mainstream media<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> By ”configuration” I refer to shape, design and designing, by “reconfiguration” I refer to redesigning implying transformation (Lykke et. al. 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Rundqvist, Daniel ”Vansinneskörningar är en ny trend”, Sveriges Radio 2007-08-17

## Cultural imaginaries - imaginary car communities

In order to analyse the discursive production of and shifting intersections between masculinity, cars and human bodies in motoring magazines, I will engage with what Graham Dawson (1994:48) calls 'cultural imaginary'. To Dawson, the 'imaginary' is taken to designate "those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs, and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions" (Dawson 1994:48). It refers to the points of exchange between discursive bodies and fantasy imagery in with cultural communities both express and reinvent themselves, thus coinciding as points of reference for their shared production of collective identity (Åsberg 2005). 'Cultural imaginaries' is a concept that is in line with Benedict Anderson's famous notion of 'imagined communities'. Anderson (1983/1991) refers to readers of a specific genre as formed around a common interest and participation in a mediated culture, forming a group of people that knows each other but never meets. Motoring magazines thus form an active part in the configurations and re-configuration in an imagined community of car enthusiasts. Furthermore, cultural imaginaries of car culture furnish the ways of seeing and making sense of car styling, shaping a collective self. Due to its subject positioning capabilities cultural imaginaries also produce what it means to for the self to be part of such imagined community. Consequently, the cultural imaginary functions as signpost to the subject positions made available through discourse.

Below, I will elaborate these subject positioning capabilities, when engaging with three different kinds of styled<sup>3</sup> cars and its associated gendered imaginaries; the so-called *muscle car*, *the sleeper car* and *the people's car*. These figurations encompass not only discourses relating to cars and driving, but also associations and implications of the car itself – its specific powers. Using the notion of figuration assumes the analytical domains of feminist science and technology studies engagement with figurations, read as "discursive, assemblages of condensed enactments, entities, effects and embodiments" (Åsberg & Lum forthcoming). The powers associated with the *muscle car* are constructed around the cultural imaginaries of the US car culture as well as the fantasy of the wild predator animal. The *sleeper car* powers

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Styled and sporty looking cars connote dangerous 'boy-racers' in many 'public' imaginings, in public debates taken to explain rising numbers of deadly accidents in traffic. However,

<sup>3</sup> There is distinction between customizing and styling in terms of style, car, materials and ways of styling. However, the inspiration of changing the car in order to *personalize* it remains the basic idea. In line of this, I use *customizing* when addressing the phenomena as such, however, a *custom* is a specific car of US origin mainly from the 1950's or 60's. A *styled* car is a newer and of either US, Japanese or European origin, from the 1990s and onwards.

on the other hand, lack of visible signs of engine potency, still rests in its capability of performing as a potent car. The *people's car* signifies power associated with Volvo - Swedish norms and roots - constructed around imaginaries of what constitutes 'Swedishness'.

Following this emphasis on seeing the car as a cultural process produced through cultural imaginaries, cars are closely involved with the histories of the nations that produce(d) them.

Taking the analytical outset in the muscle car, I use the examples to outline ways that powers associated with cars intersect with imaginaries associated with the 'US' and the 'Swedish' and the ways it produces various gendered relations between cars and customizers. In order to understand what constitutes various car/customizer relations I open up for the multiple ways masculinity, body, class, nationality, nature and technology intersect and constitute discursive techno-embodied masculinities in the making. How do the discursive formations create techno-embodied masculinities?

### **Techno-embodied masculinities**

Understanding the relations between gender, bodies and technologies such as styled cars makes feminist studies on science and technology a good place to begin. According to Anne Balsamo (1996), the idea of the merger of the biological with the technological has, by the end of the 1980s; come to permeate the imagination of 'Western' culture. The "technological human" has become a familiar figuration of the subject of post-modernity. This merger relies on a re-conceptualisation of the human body as a "techno-body", a boundary figure belonging simultaneously to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning – the organic/natural and the technological/cultural (Balsamo 1996). Donna Haraway introduced the cyborg in late 80s as a visionary feminist figuration: "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature for fiction" (1991:149). Haraway's cyborg figure transgress any clear cut divisions between machine-humans or machine-animals. According to Haraway, we may speak of 'technobodies' referring to the fusions and the increasingly intimate cohabitation between bodies and machines that are taking place in the wake of the current biotechnical and digital revolutions (Lykke 2008).

In the vein of previous feminist scholars working in the field of feminist technostudies, I will refer to what I call 'techno-embodied masculinities', as materiality and textual/subjectivity (Haraway 1991, Balsamo 1997, Sobchack 2004, Springer 1996, Lykke 2008). When discussing techno-embodied masculinities I think of such figurations as including effects of cultural, aesthetic, social, political scientific, technological and material relations and

networks in the making (Lykke et. al. 2003:11). Inspired by Vivian Sobchack (2004), I aim to understand how the human body and the technical body may provoke and sustain one another, and how together they exceed or ‘amplify’ one another through discourse. I find in the technobody figuration, a vehicle for exploring configurations of cars as partly human, animal, machine; partly organic body and partly technological artefact.

Apt both for feminist opposition *and* for teaming up with and sustaining the power of traditional notions of masculinity, I use the potentials of the technobody as a double edged figure. Haraway’s work is suitable to emphasise how techno-bodies are constructed through cultural discourse of masculinity, imaginaries of erotic and pleasurable relations between human and nonhuman actors, fuelling the discursive apparatus of techno-embodied masculinities in the making.

In what follows, I first introduce the motoring magazines to be analysed, subsequently Swedish car customizing; this is followed by the three examples of techno-embodied masculinities and finally some concluding remarks.

### **Motoring magazines**

As media-configurations, motor magazines contribute to the meanings of cars, to the production of what a car ‘is’ (Miller 2001). The motoring magazines involve references to culturally assigned meanings of images and showing, looking, being looked upon and being shown. Imaging and images are resting on dominant forms of men/masculinities, which themselves consume such pictures (Hearn and Melechi 1992:216). Motoring magazines is a genre typically attracting the interest of men. According to Carlsson et. al. (2004) men seems to continuously prefer the rather traditional car- and motor cycle magazines, a genre of positive growth and positioned on third place among Swedish magazines with specific focuses. The imagined communities produced in motoring magazines are traditionally male homosocial gatherings (Landström 2006). It is also important to recognise these magazines also encompass web sites and web communities, virtual spaces broadening the arenas for social interaction. Thus, media convergences thus reach outside the traditional scope of magazines of printed media.

The scope of car culture is extremely broad, ranging from tractors, off road driving, custom cars, classic cars, hot rods - even kids magazines based in cars. The magazines chosen for this study target re-built, styled and tuned street cars, in particular newer cars from the 1990s and onwards. The (symbolic) nationality of these cars is fairly evenly distributed among American, European and Japanese brands. In total, three different magazines<sup>4</sup>, have been analysed; *gatbilar.se*, *Street Xtreme* and *Street and Strip*.

The *gatbilar.se* magazine displays the lifestyle of car enthusiasts, aiming to be a venue where the specificities of the car are displayed in facts, cool looking pictures and trendy layout ([http://www.fabas.se/t\\_gatbilar.php](http://www.fabas.se/t_gatbilar.php)). *Gatbilar.se* ascribes a central position to the grass root enthusiasts as the magazine emerges out of a web site community of car builders. The magazine started in 2006 as a sub-division to Sweden's largest motor magazine *Bilsport*. *gatbilar.se* has a female editor and the magazine are said to apply to trendy men *and* females with an interest in cool cars with a personal touch ([http://www.fabas.se/t\\_gatbilar.php](http://www.fabas.se/t_gatbilar.php)). The same company, Albinsson & Sjöberg<sup>5</sup>, also edits *Street Xtreme*<sup>6</sup>, aiming for a gender mixed audience interested in the "worst and the best from a crazy world on wheels!" *Street and Strip* is a magazine prioritizing performance rather than styling. Different from the above-mentioned magazines, the images in *Street and Strip* pay full attention to the car, often leaving the customizer visually unattended. Nevertheless, all magazines are devoted to tell the process of re-shaping the car – including the history of the car as well as the problems, the choices and the interactions between car and customizer that make it into what it 'is' at present time.

In the first analytical step the magazines were read to assign what signifies 'the natural order of things', i.e. the ways car styling and tuning is made sense of. I specially paid attention to the relations between car and re-builder, remaining sensitive to nuances and contradictions in the material. In the second analysis, due to its illustrativeness, three articles were selected for a more detailed discussion. Before analysing these three articles, I will briefly introduce Swedish car customizing culture and relations between the US car and the Swedish Volvo.

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<sup>4</sup> *Street Xtreme*; nr 12 2007, 3-4 2008, *gatbilar.se*; nr 6 2007, nr 1-2 2008, *Street and Strip* nr 1-4 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Förlags AB Albinsson & Sjöberg is the biggest motor magazine company in Scandinavia, making 12 different motor-related magazines. <http://www.fabas.se/highfive.php>, 20 December 2007

<sup>6</sup> Estimated 62 000 readers, male editor.

## **‘Swedish’ car customizing**

The widespread visibility of the ‘Amcar’ enthusiasm culture in Sweden and Norway, makes the US<sup>7</sup> made cars of the 1950’s to 70s’ a specific branch of cars. According to Lamvik (1996:151), there are no other European countries you will find so many well kept US-made cars than Sweden and Norway. Viewed from an international perspective, the widespread interest in cars in Sweden is unusually extensive as well as rather widespread in terms of social position and age of its practitioners (Rosengren 1997). Even though this indicates evidence of an Americanization of Swedish culture, Tom O’Dell (2001:105) points to how Sweden has been Americanized in a very “Swedish” way. During the 1950s, the US car becomes a prime element in the development of the Swedish sense of itself within the movement to modernity. However, not “imported” and implemented in the sense it may have been embraced in a US context, but rather domesticated and “made” Swedish in a contradictory way. This contradiction were fully exploited by the sub culture of ‘Raggare’ (‘greasers’) in the late 1950s and 60s, taking up the aspects of sexuality, freedom and danger that their parents wanted to strip away from the American version of modernity (O’Dell 2001:23). The American car became a forum for self-expression as the working class youth developed their own aesthetics, emphasizing the impressiveness of the car, the goal being to be seen driving in style. The manner in which these youths used the cars and manipulated them is a phenomenon that has been described as typical Swedish. (see O’Dell 2001, Rosengren 2000).

During the 1970 and 1980s the American cars dominated the car enthusiast culture. The number of imported cars grew, as did the interest of remodeling cars into hot rods or restoration of cars from the 1950s and 60s. Still, the ‘Swedish’ Volvo car often did as the first car to own for youth men (Rosengren 1997:159), subsequently the domination of American cars lost its grip over Swedish car customizing culture. Because the Volvo was considered less expensive to modify compared to the American cars, a ‘new’ era of more affordable car modification was introduced. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the cultural imaginaries constituting the two cars. The branding of the Volvo car into symbolizing a safe ‘people’s car’, in a Swedish context tightly interlinked with the Swedish Folkhem, to the Social Democratic project and the welfare state. Thus, the Volvo is not just a ‘Swedish’

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<sup>7</sup> Following Hearn and Melechi (1992), referring to ‘Amcar enthusiasm’ or ‘the American car’ reproduce the American Imaginary, thus retaining and expanding its authority over image through the construction of ‘America’ the world of images and representations in modern culture. Thus, when referring to north American cars, I write ‘US’.

car; it is also symbolizing history, cultural heritage, and Swedish roots. In a Swedish context, the 'American' car symbolizes intruder and youth rebellion, Americanization and the mobility of the working class (O'Dell 2001:127). The 'Swedish aesthetics' of cars have been described as signified through orienting away from cars denoted as 'self-asserted' – the too large, 'pretentious', of chrome, US cars. In a Swedish context socio-economic status and 'good taste' are to be more subtly displayed through buying cars, such as a Mercedes (O'Dell 2001: 114).

The contemporary Swedish car-customizing scene is no longer made up by the American car or solely by US influenced ways of styling. Influences and car fantasies travels to be regionally adapted; Japanese, European and US car cultures simultaneously influences 'Swedish' car customizing. Nonetheless, 'America' still constitutes the world of images and representations within the customizing imaginary (see Hearn & Melechi 1992). Most influential, the Hollywood street racer film trilogy 'The Fast and the Furious' from early 2000, has brought new influences and with those, new kinds of cars and new ways of car styling. As iconic sports cars, the Japanese Nissan Skyline and Toyota Supra have appeared in numerous video games, movies, music videos and TV shows. Some of the most notable appearances include the 'Need for Speed' and 'Gran Turismo' series of video games and the movie, 'The Fast and the Furious'.

The US cars of the 1950s and 60s were not compatible with the Swedish aesthetics of the time. The beautiful was the same as the utilitarian, the simple, the practical and the restrained. Such cultural differences seem to still structure contemporary Swedish car customizing culture. In a Swedish context, as well as in car customizing culture internationally, someone who merely changed the appearance without improving the performance substantially is often looked down on. Even though presenting 'cutting edge car styling', car styling discourses strongly emphasize the basic mobility function of the car. The relation between looks and performance forms a central theme, a cultural construct that goes way back in the history of car customizing. As a site of pleasure, desire and identifications for located within the domain of men and masculinities, the car needs to be associated with action rather than 'simply' a beautiful object. Put shortly, racy looking cars need to be backed up with a potentially racy performance – signifying of usability and risk taking in practice. It is to the relations between looks, performance and risks I will now turn, starting with introducing the muscle car.



## **A 'damn masculine' car**

As legendary cars, the cultural imaginaries forms a strong element in the configuration of the so called 'muscle car' segment, constructing it as masculine, stronger, faster, more potent and louder compared to other cars. Build on the idea of taking a compact automobile, install a powerful engine (V8), the aim was to create an exciting "tyre-frying performance" car (Berg 2005/2007). However, the oil crisis during the 1970s forced the US automobile manufacturers to reconsider this strategy; the instalment of less potent motors during the 1970s is commonly viewed as having "killed" the muscle car. Contradictory enough, as the oil dependent west are facing the "peak oil", the gas gulping muscle car reissues of the new millennium are depicted as "faster than ever before" as horsepower is "the number one priority" (Berg 2005/2007).

These kinds of appeals, derived from specific designs of cars, prescribe certain positions for the reader to take up. Hollywood movie industry, as in the case of 'the Fast and the Furious', produce both iconic cars and drivers. One of the more famous muscle car/male hero relations is perhaps the iconic action man - 'king of cool' - Steve McQueen and the 'muscle car' Ford Mustang. The 1968 movie 'Bullitt' is famous for one of the longest car chases in film history, nine intense minutes of tyre screaming car chase through the hilly streets of San Francisco. In the cultural imaginary of cars, merges the muscle car and Steve McQueen 'cool' heterosexual masculinity<sup>8</sup> through the car chase, producing an unstoppable hyper masculine car/driver figuration to envy. The 2008 'Bullit' Mustang commercial urges potential consumers to "get into the chase", thus referring directly to the performance, masculinity and excitement afforded by the imaginaries of the 'Bullit' movie.

Contemporary car styling culture embraces the Mustang as a popular car to re-shape, tune and personalize in style. Perhaps not surprisingly, the car is depicted "damn masculine!" by a young man now owning the machine of his dreams (Street Xtreme nr 4/2008). The cultural imaginaries formed around such iconic cars - and its privileged users - form important elements in the production of techno-embodied masculinities. In the following, I will engage with the first of three examples mentioned above, aiming at outlining how gendered media-configurations of cars and hobby car customizers constructs techno-embodied masculinities.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2006, the advertisement series for Absolute Vodka showed Steve McQueen alighting from a cab, with the tagline "The Absolute Man".

## The 'muscle' techno-embodied masculinity

The article, to be analyzed in more detail below, consists of a picture, in its intertextuality referring to the Bullit movie. The owner of a 'muscle car' stands in cool, non-smiling-dark-sunglasses-pose leaning against his red and white colored Mustang (Street Xtreme nr 12/07). By focusing the process of customizing and tuning, the article constructs the car in line with the muscle car imaginary, bringing full attention to the process of releasing the potency of the vehicle. Even though the muscle car is a potent car already, the owner of this Mustang claims dissatisfied with the engine performance as it leaves the factory. On the contrary, he desires even more effect: "between 600 and 700 hundred horsepowers, that's the goal for next year!".



*Example of a 'muscle car'*

The muscle car techno-embodied masculinity figuration resides not only with the cultural imaginaries outlined above, as a boundary figure it brings together the organic with the technological. The car body, symbolized by a running horse, is discursively transformed into a body of flesh and blood in need to be 'massaged' in order to release its untamed qualities. Concurrently, the improvement of the car body relies on knowledgeable experts; the 'masseur' and famous US racing star Jack Roush. Roush is the one that have massaged and trained the "raw" material into a 'real' potent Mustang car. The configuration relies on the relocation of muscles to the "civilized" side of the nature/culture duality (Bordo 1994:291). As locus of fantasies, the muscle car brings about discourses of untamed animal powers, bringing life to the machine. The running horse translates into speed and wilderness of the car, powers calibrated by the experts at Roush's stable but in need of taming by its driver.

Thus, the muscle car is constructed as powerful machine through bringing back animalized powers into modernity. To further emphasise the car as powerful, not only the horse, but

*lethal* animals makes up a discursive theme configuring the muscle car. Similar to Bristow's (2001) study of car commercials in the UK, the imaginary formed around the muscle car construct it as 'predatory', thus potentially dangerous to its driver. From this perspective, driving a muscle car implies engaging not with a car, but "A Poisonous Snake with a Deadly Bite" (Street Xtreme nr 3/2008). The car no longer consists of metal and glass, as it is ascribed agency of its own - "calling for a race" - it turns into techno-body.

These kinds of predatory animal/machine hybridity transform the muscle car into a performative machine, a car that is in communication with its surroundings. According to the Street Xtreme, the powerful appearance of the muscle car signify 'get out of the way', making fellow road users step out of the way as the muscle car forces its way forward (Street Xtreme nr 3, 2008). The muscle car is thus a construction of agency and powerful appearance. In light of this, it makes up a configuration of hyper masculinity; as predatory, dominating and unstoppable. The fetishism of the wild forces of nature brings the untamed 'beast' back in to modernity to be seduced and aroused by, nonetheless intimidated by.

Muscles are a quintessential symbol of masculinity as a "natural" (rather than achieved) difference from femininity (Bordo 1994:291). Car powers, offered through technology, are evidently possible to take up by both male and female bodies, however culturally constructed as technology for men. The discursive formations make muscle cars into a male excitement, not only by virtue of its brute size and animalistic strength, but due to devoid of will and control. Similar to the hunter or the explorer, the imagined driver is ascribed willing and daring enough to engage with the untamed powers of (a feminine) nature, constructed as a risky play between control and lack of control afforded by the animalistic extreme machine. When the wild life animals are brought back from the past, through the powers of the muscle car, it also configures the user 'true' masculinity in a classed sense. In a Swedish context, as a symbol of youth rebellion, vulgarity, danger, sexuality and violence, the muscle car configuration produce a subject position defined against those of the "boring" middle- and upper-class respectability and choices of cars (see O'Dell 2001). As an aspect of embodiment, the price for such 'body builder' techno-embodiment lays with its vulnerability. Similar to usage of steroids, which can lead to the development of breasts and impotence, the muscle car technobody also entails the risks of failure due to the enormous powers the motor needs to be able to handle. If it busts, the techno-embodied masculinity would immediately 'fail' in its performance. Reading the muscle techno-embodied "hyper-masculinity" through the lens of

its vulnerabilities rather than the dense armour is not to deny what it is capable of in terms of violent effects, but to reveal the ways the dominance encompass contradictions, antagonisms and inconsequences (See Bordo 1994). From a class perspective, the muscle car techno-embodied masculinity may be considered to signify a rather grotesque, contradictory and aged ideal of masculinity (Johansson 1998:253). As signifier of working class masculinity, the muscle car does not encompass 'Swedish' middle class aesthetics in cars. The sleeper car on the other hand, may just do that.

### **The 'sleeper' techno-embodied masculinity**

Compared to the muscle cars, with its overt visual elements and associated impression of high performance, the sleeper car has high performance but an unassuming exterior. According to Wikipedia, sleeper cars are termed such because their exterior looks little or no different from a standard or economy-class car, but internally they are modified to perform at higher levels. The term 'sleeper' may be used to describe almost any vehicle that appears unfinished or is built simply to perform fast accelerations. The term refers to how an aggressive animal can seem gentle or perhaps friendly until awoken. The "sleeper" may also refer to the spy or the agent, one who has infiltrated into the target country and 'gone to sleep'. That is, they do nothing to communicate with their sponsor, any existing agents, nor to obtain information beyond that in public sources ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeper\\_agent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeper_agent)). The lack of visible 'grotesque' car muscles still leaves the car fully capable of performing if necessary, thus more in line with contemporary Swedish ideals of middle class masculinity respectability.



*Example of a 'sleeper' car*

It is significant how 'measuring' in the social realm of traffic forms a reoccurring aspect in the discursive theme of the 'sleeper', configuring the car as an actor with specific qualities. In the *Street and Strip* (1/2008) article "Bruksbilen" [The everyday car] the sleeper actor is a worn out looking red 1975 Volvo station wagon. The sleeper car imaginary ascribes the car qualities useful when engaging in spontaneous street racing. This article tells about a situation

where it is used to fool an opponent into underestimating the car's performance, in effect, opening up for the purposes of "hustling".

*“While Ted was out driving with the car, he just happened to come up to a Nissan Skyline that at first did not seem willing to race at all. Who would blame him for not being interested when the opponent was a station wagon full of people [with roof shelf]? This is the point of sleepers. It wasn't until Ted pushed the car fully in third gear making flames come out of the waste gate pipe the ‘Jap-guy’ got it, all of a sudden got really interested”.*

The point of the sleeper car may be summed up to “performance without show”. The sleeper car configuration merges car body as own body through the process of re-making the car ‘act’ better as a street racer car. To assume the implications of class with the ways masculinity, bodies and technology are configured, the sleeper techno-embodied masculinity is different from the former example. Drawing on Vaaranen (2004), class may be resisted not only through risk taking, but also craftsmanship and know-how about how to increase car performance. Throughout the article, the customizer is positioned as an active subject in the process of co-constructing a technobody as an underdog. A ‘joker position’, from which the ability to stand tall and strike back regarding the measuring on the streets is much stronger compared to showing any visible ‘car muscles’. To awake the ‘sleeper’ car, and let it break loose into something ‘huge’, may ensure the driver respectability by proving masculinity through the ability to shame back. Following this, the effects of masculinity as performed through craftsmanship, technology and driving skills seem hard to separate from various forms of embodiments and emotions. To summarize, the ‘sleeper’ techno-embodied masculinity enables (risky) driving practises and measuring among men, affording emotions related to humiliation, honour and respect that circulate between driver subjects and objects in the realm of traffic.

### **Pit stop**

The close connections between technology and masculinity have so far been discussed in terms where technology configures masculine techno-embodiment. I have emphasised the implications of cultural imaginaries to the formation of less clear cut separations between man/machine, a cyborg ontology making any separations of human, animal, machine qualities impossible. Fuelled by the cultural imaginaries of Hollywood action movies and fantasies of

aggressive animals, the techno-embodied masculinity configuration seems like an unstoppable incarnation, as it moves about within the social realm of everyday traffic.

However, the techno-embodied figuration may also hold queer positions. As a double-edged figure, the technobody allows exploring queer configurations, namely, the female car customizer position. What happens if the techno-embodied configuration 'is' female rather than (taken for granted) male? Does the female car customizer challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity? Is this a figuration that undermines the more or less taken for granted connections of men-masculinity-car?

### **The 'female' techno-embodied masculinity**

Judith Halberstam (1998) emphasise the inability for the prevailing binary gender system to encompass gender performances not passing as either "male" and "female". If the above articles strengthened the symbolic links between male, masculinity and the car, the point of using Halberstam is to question such links and open up for a discussion whether ideal versions of masculinity both can, and is produced by, and across, male and female bodies. The article "Lekande lätt för Stina" [Playfully easy for Stina] (gatbilar.se nr 6/07) tells the story of a young female customizers journey re-building a Volvo 240 from 'ordinary' into 'spectacular' street car. Historically, the Volvo 240 is a most 'ordinary car' in Swedish car culture, a car "everybody have owned at some occasion" (Ulander 2007). It is important to recognise, viewed from a Swedish perspective, the Volvo is not just 'a' car - it symbolises Swedishness and rootings - configuring it into a 'peoples car' different from the muscle and sleeper cars.

The framing of the article seems to be in conversation with cultural imaginaries positioning a woman modifying cars a bad combination. 'Men', rather than 'women', are stereotypically accredited the ability and opportunity to "reopen the black box of the car", i.e. to re-interpret its function, re-make and re-define its configurations. Compared to how male car builders are narrated in the magazines, the female car builder know-how is not taken for granted.

Throughout the article, it is her interest, know-how and participation in learning the conducts of what the 'imagined community' of car customizers normally does, that make up the main theme. Further, the process of learning the skills of car customizing is a time consuming process. Even though the modification of the Volvo took over five years, it is not the time as such that is the matter, more importantly is that she carried out the project. Throughout the

article, her success and know-how is strongly related to the expertise of men in garages or neighbouring boys, assuming the roles of more experienced experts in car styling.

In order to configure female techno-embodied masculinity, the female car customizer needs to be legitimized as part of the imagined car community. Viewed from this perspective, the Swedish motor magazines analysed here, may both confirm and elaborate Landström's (2006) study<sup>9</sup> from which women were disqualified as being too "rational" and unable to attach emotionally to cars (Landström 2006:31). In light of this, it is important to recognise how the subject positioning seems dependent upon constructing the female customizer as respectable and part of the imagined community. Following this, the discourse tends to configure a female subject position through emphasising her trainings by men, her success as car builder, and her interest in Volvo cars as "real love to the concept of Volvo 240". Rather than being excluded along lines of gender, the novice female car customizer is made respectable throughout the article, a process of emotional commitment to the imagined community.

The female techno-embodied masculinity also assumes the role of car as locus of fantasies. Such respectability resonates with her future goal "to drag one of her friends BMW M3". The goal to customize the 'ordinary' Volvo 240, into a car fast enough to beat the high performance BMW, implies emphasising car usability, risky car performances and measuring rather than just looks. Thus, her ambition articulates the discourse of the underdog self-made-man seen in the story about the 'sleeper' above; "just you wait..." Within this particular regime of meaning, the female techno-embodied masculinity is brought into play through the Volvo brotherhood, simultaneously reproducing it *and* configuring a queer subject position within the imagined car community.

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<sup>9</sup> Landström concludes the love of cars is a passion shared by an imagined community of men, it is through men's bodies that the feel and sensual appeal of cars are sensed, constructing the car as an object that ties men together across social differences in a homosocial imagined community. Within this context gender is constructed in terms of difference and incompatibility, making it harder for women to transgress into such male domains (Landström 2006:33). The Swedish motor magazines addressed in this paper brings about other perspectives; some of the articles are written by women, one magazine editor is female, test rides may be performed by women, even though not that frequently, women car customizers and their projects are presented to the readers. Even though rare, articles about well established female customizers may not differ much from those of male car builders, the differences emerges when a young novice is introduced to the imagined audience.

## Final lap

In this paper I have discussed ways that discursive formations formed around cars, masculinity, bodies, class, cultural imaginaries of the 'US' and the 'Swedish', have produced techno-embodied masculinities. From a feminist standpoint, the present "state of the body" in contemporary culture seems at first problematic, however possibly positive. What seems particularly relevant is the ways dualisms of body/car body and human/nature are blurred, dislocating aspects of control, agency and power to a configuration made up by various interactions of organic, natural, technological and cultural entities in ways that 'amplifies' techno-embodied masculinities through discourse. The indications of the above analysis indicate a direction of permitting 'hardness' in women, to embody a techno-embodied masculinity ethos and aesthetics, but seemingly never softness in men (see Bordo 1994:292).

I have argued the US muscle car is configured as hyper masculine; in particular through the play with untamed animalistic metaphors that configures it as an exclusively male thing. The cultural imaginaries associated with the customized US muscle car produce it into a relation between male bodies, expertise and the untamed 'beasty' muscle car body in the making. In a Swedish context, such cars are constructed as working class artefacts. The louder, bigger, more powerful and brutal 'muscle' techno-embodiment of the muscle car is always in conversation with the normality of the "safe" techno-embodiment associated with middle class positions. However, 'ordinary' cars may be customized into potent 'sleeper' techno-embodiments; a kind of super hero techno-embodied masculinity and locus for fantasies of being more than one seems to be. In the social realm of traffic the assemblage pass as 'ordinary', if challenged having the capabilities of producing enormous powers. The 'female' techno-embodiment is not excluded from these cultural domains. Nor is she excluded from the imagined male car communities constituted around the Volvo car. However, in order to become respectable techno-embodiment as masculine, she first has to be emotionally committed to the ideals of the community, i.e. car usability and celebration of risk taking with cars. In light of this, the car seems to have become just as much 'penis- enhancement' for women, as traditionally ascribed men.

Following this, the potentials of the technobody as a double-edged figure seems to both reproduce it as (risky) masculine, while simultaneously transgressing the traditional boundaries of femininity. Whether this count for "female masculinity" that "re-imagines masculinity", as Halberstam (1998:355) would suggest, or a form of "armoured femininity" to



speaking with Susan Bordo (1994:294), may be debated. The female techno-embodied masculinity forms a gendered underdog position that forcefully may undermine the symbolic links between men-masculinity and cars. On the one hand, she is technologically modified with one of the ultimate marker of working class masculinity, configuring her into a powerful embodiment of female identity, thus less constrained by norms of proper femininity and passivity (Balsamo 1997:129). On the other, marked by gender the female technobody seems never fully able to overcome the gender dualisms at play. Existing within a different political category such constructions, paradoxically, no matter how much they may contradict dominant gender stereotypes, seems never able to fully transgress the political category of girl/woman. It seems urgent to both attend to what techno-embodied masculinities *do*, thus broadening the ways cultural imaginaries, (male) bodies/car bodies are interrelated, to encompassing its violating effects.

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